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ABSTRACT

This article discusses issues related to body image in adolescents, explaining what school practitioners can do to encourage lifelong healthy habits that enhance body image. Body image is the picture of physical self carried in the mind's eye. This impression can have little resemblance to how a teen actually looks. Body image culturalization is the process by which an adolescent integrates others' perceptions with an internal sense of what is an acceptable or ideal size. It is important for teens to feel acceptance and satisfaction with their bodies. This relates to overall self-esteem and self-confidence. Adolescents who are deeply unhappy with their body image or have trouble accepting the developmental changes that come with puberty might take extreme measures to control weight gain. It is useful for them to understand the connection between body image and eating disorders. Things that practitioners can do in their schools to help students build a positive body image as part of lifelong healthful habits include: discourage dieting, provide comprehensive nutrition education, stress the importance of maintaining a comfortable weight, and discourage teens from using weight and the scale to measure progress toward health. (SM)

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Encouraging Lifelong Healthy Habits for A Positive Body Image in Adolescents

Susan looks in the mirror and see's a teenager who needs to lose twenty pounds; she only weighs 90 pounds. Jose runs 75 to 100 miles a week and wonders why he can't bulk up a bit. Although the names have been changed, these are real teens that may have one thing in common - a negative perception of their body, called body image. This article discusses issues of body image in adolescents and what practitioners in schools can do to encourage life long healthy habits that enhance body image.

Definition of Body Image and Culturization

Body image is the picture of physical self that is carried in the mind's eye (Melpomene Institute, 1990). This impression can have little resemblance to how a teen actually looks, weighs, or is composed in fat or muscle. Body image culturization is the process by which an adolescent integrates others' perception with an internal sense of what is an acceptable or ideal size. It is a value or attitude toward current shape, weight or size that goes beyond pounds or inches. Thomas (1988) reported factors which influence a teen's satisfaction with his/her body image: physical characteristics, the way others react to their physical self, self comparison to others, and

comparisons to cultural ideals. Those listed as others might be parents, siblings, friends, coaches, teachers, or media. The perceived norms of peers at school have a great deal of influence on the adolescence body image as well.

Many adolescents long to be thinner, broader, or more muscular because of media pressure. Kilbourne (1999) has been a leader in publicizing the media culturization of beauty that damages girls' and adolescents' health and body image through films such as "Killing Us Softly III" and "Slim Hopes." One of her beliefs is that beauty is presented as an unattainable goal for girls in order to sell products. Millions of dollars are spent on cosmetics, hair products, and lotions every year. Adolescent girls may feel that as their bodies change with puberty, they must try to meet the cultural criteria for beauty. Boys likewise see common images of a muscular physique or height that may not be attainable to them genetically. The current models and media figures put tremendous pressure on teens. Given the models of masculinity and beauty shown today, it may be very difficult to have a good body image. Clearly, it is important for teens to feel acceptance and satisfaction with their body.

Importance of Body Image

A good body image would seem to be related to an adolescent's overall self-esteem and self-confidence. In a study by Brodie and

Slade (1988), dissatisfaction with body image was related to dieting and bingeing and emotional problems. Adolescent girls' dieting patterns are especially troubling.

The Melpomene Institute (1990) looked a the incidence of dieting in girls before and during puberty. They asked 500 school girls about dieting patterns. Almost 50 percent of the nine-year olds and 80 percent of the ten-year olds were dieting to lose weight. By age 17 almost 89% of the girls reported dieting, using vomiting, laxatives, fasting, or diet pills to help control weight. Only 17 percent were measured to be overweight. In another study of minority girls (Native American), 48 percent of the secondary students had been on a diet in the last year (Story, Hauch, Broussard, White, Resnick and Blum, 1994). In their study, girls who reported feeling overweight were also more likely to engage in unhealthy weight control practices such as self induced vomiting. Effort spent losing weight or attaining a larger physique takes energy and time away from adolescents which could be spent reaching a fuller potential in educational attainment or personal development.

Adolescent who are deeply unhappy with their body image or have trouble accepting the developmental changes that come with puberty might take extreme measures to control weight gain. Films, "Beyond the Looking Glass" and "When Food is An Obsession," (Hour

Glass Productions, 1996) are good films for adolescents to gain an understanding of the connection between body image and eating disorders. This relationship is of primary concern for educators, parents and clinicians.

Helping Adolescents Develop a Positive Body Image

What can concerned practitioners do in their schools to help students build a positive body image as part of lifelong healthful habits?

First, discourage dieting. Dieting can affect adolescent emotional well being, and physical health and set them on a path to repeated failure in weight management. Encourage healthful eating in a natural, relaxed way (Robison, 1997). Discourage self starvation or restricted dieting. Educate students about the dangers of bingeing, self induced vomiting, using laxatives or plastic sweats to dehydrate. These can have serious short term results and well as develop into lifelong dangerous habits.

Second, through nutrition education, students need the information that fat is not all bad. Although few would argue today that reducing dietary fat is the most healthful eating plan, adolescents, may view all dietary and body fat as bad, not realizing that fat is important to the developmental process. Fat contributes to hormone production, acts as padding for protection of organs,

provides insulation for temperature maintenance, and activates fertility. Adolescent girls began to store fat in the thighs and stomach for future pregnancy and breast feeding. Dietary fat is also a rich source of calories for the growing body. Teenagers are unaware of the positive aspects of dietary and physical fat.

Third, practitioners need to stress the importance of maintaining a comfortable weight. This weight should be one where the individual feels good, has lots of energy, and is healthy. A critical factor in maintaining a weight is daily activity and exercise. Aerobic exercise such as walking, biking and swimming help maintain weight, as do less structured physical activities such skate boarding, imming with friends or rollerblading with family.

Finally, discourage teens from using weight and the scale to measure progress towards health. Using a scale to measure weight really means nothing in terms of what a body is composed of. Individuals vary tremendously in bone, muscle mass, fluid, and fat, so height and weight scales are no better than a guess at best, of a healthy weight. Determining percent fat using skin folds or underwater weighing may be a more accurate measure to tell adolescents approximately how much fat they have on their body. Results should again be given with care. This is still an estimate of an individual's true body composition and should be treated as such.

In summary, this article has attempted to examine body image and the impact of body image on adolescents. Practitioners in school can help to support a positive body image in adolescents by supporting healthful eating, activity, and acceptance of self (Johnson, 1995). Focusing on the range of difference in human bodies reinforces the uniqueness and intrinsic worth of each person, regardless of shape or size.

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